1. The International Indian Treaty Council (IITC) addresses item 20, the rights of the child, guided by the belief that our decisions and actions will affect the children for the next seven generations. The rights and well-being of indigenous children in particular depend upon the cultural integrity of our peoples and the ability of the family to carry out its responsibilities within our communities.

2. The IITC commends Mrs. Graça Machel for her valiant report of 1996 and her statements on children and armed conflict. Furthermore, we support the recommendation to establish a special representative of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict.

3. Since 1995, children have been caught in over 30 major armed conflicts throughout the world. In the last decade alone, over 2 million children have been killed, nearly 5 million disabled, 12 million left homeless, more than 1 million orphaned or separated from their parents and some 10 million psychologically traumatized. In Chiapas, Mexico, a large percentage of those wounded or killed at the hands of paramilitary groups or state police were children. Hundred of children have been forced to flee conditions of terror to equally harsh conditions of malnutrition, limited shelter and lack of medicines for illnesses that, when left untreated, are fatal.

4. Cecilia Jiménez, a two-month-old infant, died recently of pneumonia in the presence of a commission of observers in Chiapas composed of various international NGO representatives. The Commission found that, in one community swollen with 8,000 refugees from 32 communities displaced by recent paramilitary attacks in the region, approximately 60 per cent of the displaced were children.

5. Children are defenceless victims of warfare, yet their suffering seems not to matter to State policy makers. For example, 58 per cent of the victims of anti-personnel landmines are civilians, many of whom are children. For those who survive, the psychological trauma associated with the loss of limbs is considerable. The only purpose of these inherently indiscriminate weapons is to kill or maim.

6. In 1994, 2-5 million landmines were laid and only 100,000 were cleared. Millions of landmines are in stockpiles: Somalia has imported them from 27 countries and in Angola there are approximately 9 million of them lying in the ground. More than 110 million active landmines are spread out across sacred Mother Earth, sometimes detonating 20 years after the conflict ends!

7. Indiscriminate attacks and the use of indiscriminate weapons are specifically prohibited by the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols. These practices, and particularly the use of anti-personnel landmines, have been recognized as violations of fundamental human rights, particularly the right to life, by all major international bodes, including all regional organizations of States. The international community has been united in the condemnation of their use, and has noted in particular the tragic effects of these devices on children. The prohibition against the use of weapons which cause unnecessary suffering applies to all States, independent of their treaty obligations. The trade in landmines must be prohibited and their production should be banned. The IITC calls on all

Governments to sign the 1980 Convention on Conventional Weapons, including Protocol II which deals, in part, with landmines.

8. In 1995 the United States of America signed the Convention on the Rights of the Child and has expressed support for the Convention before this august body, but has not yet sought to ratify it. Ironically, the United States Government is simultaneously trying to dismantle Public Law 95-608 of 1978, referred to as the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA), which was designed so that Indian tribes, the United States and the Federal Government could work cooperatively to achieve the following: to maintain the integrity of Indian families by providing supportive services; to closely examine the standards applied for removal of children due to abuse, neglect or parental unfitness; to recognize the jurisdiction of tribal courts in certain cases; and to make every effort to place Indian children in Indian foster homes when out-of-home placement is necessary as a last resort.

9. The United States Congress passed the law in response to overwhelming evidence from Indian communities that the loss of their children meant the destruction of their cultures. Significantly, ICWA was developed after the discovery that the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) was contracting agencies to implement an interstate adoption clearing house for Indian children, a veritable "adopt an Indian" programme. In its first year the BIA's programme placed 395 Indian children from western states into non-Indian homes in eastern metropolitan areas. In 1976 a nationwide study found that up to 1,400 Indian children per year were being adopted by non-Indian homes.

10. There is no resource more vital to the continued existence and integrity of Indian peoples than our children. The United States of America fails to recognize our need to maintain the cultural and social standards that are the fabric of Indian communities and families. Current congressional and presidential initiatives represent an assault on Indian Nations. They are also contrary to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and are tantamount to the "final" solution of ethnocide.

11. The ICWA will again face intense scrutiny in Congress, which threatens to seriously erode ICWA protections, resulting in the destruction of tribal families. Since 1995 we have sought to educate members of Congress about ICWA and its importance to our children and our families. But we continue to be alarmed by many legislators' outdated, assimilationist positions, as exemplified during a Subcommittee on Indian Affairs hearing in June 1997, in which a congresswoman asked why it was such a priority for Indian communities to protect the cultural heritage of their children when the option of material goods was available. As we face the millennium, we will continue to educate the United States Congress so that it can finally abandon policies equivalent to those of the nineteenth century which were explicitly designed to remove Indian children from their families in an effort to "save the man by killing the Indian".

12. Congressional sources also indicate that, during the present session of Congress, major changes to federal foster care and adoption policy will be proposed in order to remove barriers to adoptions. A similar presidential initiative, the Multi-Ethnic Placement Act, would eliminate all cultural and social standards for adoption, meaning that Indian children could be adopted

by non-Indians and therefore be forced to learn life values different from their own.

13. Many advocates for Indian children are concerned that, while efforts to increase the availability of permanent homes for children are important, opponents of ICWA might use such efforts to undo protections for Indian children. A number of social workers contend that a movement toward permanent adoptions over standard foster care policy, as endorsed by President Clinton last year, will too quickly deny children the chance to be reunited with their biological parents.

14. Many dismal statistics indicate that indigenous children suffer the cumulative effects of colonization when deprived of their cultural environment. The effects include: low achievement, poor health, moral and spiritual deterioration, and a staggering suicide rate. We, the indigenous peoples, will continue to challenge legislative initiatives that would separate our children from their family groups and thereby thwart our families' traditional path. Our children have a right to follow us home, back to the sacred hoop of life. Our children have a right to a future, a nationality, a language, culture, religion and a safe environment free from trauma and displacement. The IITC urges the United States of America to immediately ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child in the interest of all children, and for the coming generations.